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## **Supporting Children and Young People with Transition during the Extended School Closures**

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Birmingham Educational Psychology Service has drawn up this guidance on how to support C/YP (Children and Young people) with transitions during the extended school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It covers a range of ideas of how to support C/YP back into school. Further transition guidance is being developed regarding supporting the well-being of school staff.

## What do we need to consider when thinking about transition?

**“The many problems of returning to school” – Sara Alston, SEA Inclusion & Safeguarding**

The document referenced above offers some valuable insight into some of the considerations we could make when thinking about transitions. One of these considerations is that schools haven't been shut. This is important to think about in terms of staff wellbeing and tiredness levels when schools re-open. Everyone has had a different experience during the pandemic, and it is important that we focus on building our relationships and re-establishing school communities.

The different experiences had by those during this pandemic will be vast and it will be important to celebrate what children and young people (C/YP) have learnt whilst being empathetic to their more traumatic experiences. The inclusion of children in education will have varied, with some having been excluded from education for different reasons for example, lack of resources and the time parents have been able to spend with their children, to name a couple. It is also important to note that the children who have been attending school could have also had adverse experiences due to additional traumas, for example, separating from parents who are key workers.

Some consequences of the pandemic which may need to be considered further in transition are also that some C/YP may show sensory difficulties from not having been around large groups of people for so long. Some may display separation anxiety, those with special educational needs may have struggled with the change more so than their peers, and also families may have suffered financial hardship and therefore, uniform may be difficult to supply following the return to school.

As C/YP have spent a lot of time away from the protective factor of school, we must also consider that abuse may have taken place in different forms. It is important that school staff are supported to be vigilant and up to date in safeguarding practice to be able to identify any indicators of abuse and report using the correct channels.

Some C/YP may have also experienced bereavement, this would not only have affected them but also their family. This could result in heightened anxiety and risk averse behaviours. Using approaches such as PACE which involves Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy can be a good approach to use for connecting with C/YP and allowing a safe space for them to feel safe to discuss their experiences.

Transition is a challenging time for everyone, with the added complexity of the pandemic we need to remember to be kind to ourselves and be flexible in our expectations, not just of ourselves but of our C/YP too. By carefully managing transitions back to school we can help promote and teach resilience in the face of adversity.

## What can we do to support C/YP returning to school?

Research by Hobfoll et al., 2007 identifies five key principles to support recovery following a disaster or serious incident. These are important to consider when supporting children, young people and staff returning to school.

The five principles are:

- **A sense of safety:** Children, young people and the staff at school need to feel safe when they return.

- **A sense of calm:** A range of emotions will be experienced by C/YP before, during and after their transition to school. These emotions should be validated and normalised to help C/YP become regulated and calm.
- **A sense of self- and collective- efficacy:** It is important that C/YP feel a sense of control about what is happening to them. They should feel that their individual actions alongside those done collaboratively with their peers will lead to positive outcomes.
- **Social connectedness:** Children, young people and staff in school should feel they belong to their school community and can be supported in school.
- **Promoting hope:** Creating and encouraging active hope will be important for showing children, young people and the staff in school that things will get better.

## General Guidance

C/YP will have left their current class abruptly and it appears unlikely that there will be a whole school return before the next academic year. They haven't had the opportunity to do the usual end of year activities and say goodbye.

If children aren't returning to school until September, then consideration as to which class they return to is needed. During the when schools are closed, they may benefit from their teacher writing them a letter or creating them a video which contains something unique to the C/YP to show they are being kept in mind. For those in year groups where there is not a physical change in setting, they would benefit from being with familiar teachers at some point in the week to allow for sharing of their experiences and bring some closure to their experience with that teacher and class.

The first few days/weeks back at school could be focussed on several things

- Re-connecting,
- Celebrating achievements,
- Remembering the year gone by
- Preparing for the new class and teacher.
- Therapeutic play
- Sharing of experiences, fears and anxieties

Activities that might help with these are:

- A reunion bag containing some key representative items.
- Alphabet list of what we appreciate about being back
- Time capsule - memories of our time away
- A chocolate box of our joint strengths
- Sharing the umbrella - how we support one another
- Tea party with last year's teacher
- 'My going back to school story' (see attachment)
- Teamwork and activities involving peer interactions

It would be a good opportunity for staff to help re-establish relationships, routines and expectations. This would also be a time for C/YP to reconnect with each other.

As the previous class teacher will have a frame of reference for what the child was like before, staff liaison or time for the C/YP to be with their previous teacher will allow staff who know them best to evaluate and pick up on any changes in:

- Presentation
- Signs of trauma
- Emotion
- Anxiety

For all age groups it is important to acknowledge the range of feelings C/YP might have experienced during their time away from school. These could be both positive and negative such as feelings of loss. Emotion coaching scripts can be a valuable tool to help validate these feelings and problem solve the next steps. For example, scripts can acknowledge feelings of things being unfair but also acknowledge more positive feelings such as excitement for the next stage. It is important to remain curious and not to make assumptions about how children will be feeling as there will be a range of emotions. Birmingham Educational Psychology Service has created an 'Emotion Coaching Guidance' resource pack for parents which provides detail about talking to C/YP about emotions and supporting them to develop their skills at regulating their emotions. This is available on the Birmingham Education Support Service (BESS) website:

<http://www.birminghameducationsupportservices.co.uk/Page/16955>

It will be important to identify who may require extra support at transition – this could be children who were previously school avoiding or who could become school avoiders (see below for more information). It could be children who have experienced bereavement or trauma during their time out of school, children with SEND or children in care. Please see resources developed by Birmingham EPS regarding supporting bereavement which are available on the BESS website.

<http://www.birminghameducationsupportservices.co.uk/Page/16955>

It would be beneficial to have available additional pastoral care for those who require it, either individually or in small groups. This might include opportunities to leave the classroom if children become overwhelmed or having access to an identified key adult who they can go to if they want to talk.

## **Supporting children to 'move on' from the class that they were in prior to the Covid-19 circumstances**

C/YP with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities may need some extra consideration during the transition time as they may have struggled with these challenging times more so than their peers. Some ways that transition could be adapted and supported to meet their needs are:

- By providing visuals with the letter from the teacher
- Individualised video for the child
- The use of therapeutic stories
- Use of transitional objects

## Preparing children for the next class/school and change of class teacher

In similar ways to supporting C/YP leaving a class, we can also welcome them into their next class/school. Due to Covid-19 C/YP will not have had the usual 'meet the teacher' days.

Strategies that could be used:

- Virtual school/classroom walkthrough - A video of the school and classroom that the child will be going into could be created for each year group with a welcome from the receiving teacher for each class. This could include key information such as: entrance, playground, where the coats are hung up, where things are kept in the classroom and some of the classroom routines.
- Transition book – to provide information about the next classroom with photos of key staff, the room and information about routines and the exciting areas of learning that will be covered next year
- Ask the C/YP to write or draw something they would like their new teacher to know about them, and for their new teacher to then have these on display in their classroom so this is something familiar to those transitioning.
- The child/young person could develop a written one-page profile about themselves or update one that they already have. A sample 'all about me' profile is included in the parent guidance.
- Birmingham Educational Psychology Service have created a 'My going back to school story' which can be used and adapted to help children feel more prepared about returning to school.

## Supporting children with SEND or additional needs

- SEND information transfer - Previous class teacher and SENCo share paperwork (e.g. EHCPs, IEPs, one-page profiles) ahead of transition to the new class teacher and share strategies that they have found to help meet that child's needs.
- Rix Wiki – Families may like to apply for a Rix Wiki page where they can upload videos, files, photos and text as a safe and secure way of a family contacting the school and professionals. Children and families can create a dynamic and person centred 'one-page profile' that can then be shared as a transition document. This is a great way for the child/young person to voice what matters to them and what they worry about. An example public Rix Wiki will soon be available by the end of May to share with families. Please see below a link to a video that explains what a Wiki is:

<https://youtu.be/0zaspxuunw>

## Considerations for C/YP with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition

Many C/YP with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition find change particularly difficult to manage. They will benefit from all of the good practice outlined in this document, with some additional strategies and planning, depending on their individual needs.

An individual transition plan, coproduced by parents and staff who know the C/YP and who have experience of working with pupils with autism, should include some of the support outlined below. Where possible the pupil should also give their views about what will help them and what they may find difficult.

**Planning for change**

- Identify a key adult to oversee transition and work with all those involved
- Liaise with parents to agree the best time to start preparing the pupil for change (some pupils will prefer lots of preparation, for others this may provoke more anxiety)
- Additional opportunities to speak to their key adult, class teacher and peers before returning (support to prepare questions or information to share will make these conversations more helpful) or to receive video messages/ look at photos of staff, friends and the school building
- Use of personalised social stories about returning to school
- Preparation for what will be different in school: social distancing rules, staggered lunchtimes/pick up/drop off, use of hand sanitisers and (possibly) masks
- Focus on what will be the same for the child to reduce anxiety: same staff, classroom, furniture, equipment etc
- Encourage flexible thinking around the 'challenges' of returning to school. Please see guidance provided by the EPS on BESS website / handout on developing flexible thinking

**Supporting emotional regulation/managing anxiety in School**

- Use of a visual/personal timetable covering all aspects of the school day
- A visual map with highlighted classrooms and routes to get there (secondary school)
- Use of a transition object/comfort object to support start of the school day
- Provision for less structured times of the day: leaving and arriving at lessons early so corridors are quieter, early lunch breaks, quieter area to eat food with friends, lunchtime clubs
- Reduce work demands initially to manage anxiety and personalise activities to reflect pupil's special interests
- Use of now and next boards or task boards to outline steps within an activity
- Pupils may attempt to exert more control in school as a natural response to feeling anxious and out of control. Provide limited choices and flexibility where possible, for example about how they record their learning or when they complete their reading eg. 'you can read your book now or after snack time'.
- Staff who support the pupils should be aware of their signs of dysregulation and know what to offer the child to support them to calm
- Often sensory seeking behaviours will increase if a pupil is feeling stressed or anxious. Plan for and build in more frequent sensory breaks and activities that involve physical movement
- Use of metacognitive strategies: where appropriate staff support the child to plan ahead and identify situations that will be tricky for them and use self-talk/verbal scripts to calm their anxiety.

**Supporting Sensory needs**

- Pupils may find the return to a school results in a significant increase or decrease to the sensory information/experiences that have had over the past months
- Have sensory toys/supports ready for the child to use, for example, fiddle toys, ear defenders
- Plan for activities/transitions which they may find difficult because of the sensory demands
- Remember situations that they may have coped with previously could become more challenging for them during times of anxiety and change



- Where sensory seeking behaviours are potentially unhelpful for the child or difficult to manage, provide replacement behaviours

## **Considerations for Children in Care**

On their journey through care some C/YP may have adapted coping strategies that might not be appropriate for the school context. Transition to school could be another trigger for anxiety for these C/YP who may have already experienced a lot of change. Some ways to help reduce anxiety and prepare them for transitions could be:

- Role play. Their caregivers could role play with them some scenarios they may encounter in school. For example, meeting a teacher, introducing themselves or asking for help. If possible being able to have a virtual meeting with a teacher before transition may help to give an opportunity to put this role play into action at a safe distance.
- Having a key adult that has been identified that the child or young person can go to may be useful in helping them identify their support networks.
- Encouraging the child or young person to tell you something about them, that they would like you to know ready for when you start school.
- Being aware of Emotion Coaching techniques can help to prepare staff to empathise and validate any feelings that may occur through the transition process and how to manage these in a way that builds trust with their new students.

## **Children who were experiencing attendance difficulties prior to the extended school closures**

A subgroup of children at school will have been experiencing attendance difficulties, and in some cases persistent non-attendance, prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The reasons for non-attendance are wide ranging and the British Psychological Society (2017) report that this can include:

- Emotionally based non-attendance where mental health difficulties affect the student or family members.
- Physical health related ranging from unusually frequent illnesses to chronic conditions that necessitate extended absences from school and sometimes in-patient treatment.
- Attitudinal/systemic absenteeism that becomes significant when it is habitual or too frequently a pragmatic solution e.g. where the value of 100 percent school attendance is not supported by the value system or a student, their family or the student's peer culture.
- School behaviour-related such as exclusions, managed moves, alternative provisions and part-time timetables.

There are also secondary maintenance factors that can make it more difficult for children to re-engage with school following periods of absence, such as:

- Loss of relationships (peer friendships/relationships with staff) and feeling disconnected from others due to isolation
- Falling behind in schoolwork and/or fear of falling behind
- Decreased motivation to attend school
- Anxiety and negative thoughts about ability to return to school linked to above factors

It is anticipated that extended school closures and possible emotional consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak may exacerbate children's school attendance problems and the underlying factors that may have been contributing to this. It is also recognised that children who are vulnerable to possible school attendance problems may find the return to school particularly challenging.

The advice included in this document should serve as good practice for children who were experiencing school attendance difficulties prior to COVID-19. Other considerations for school staff include:

### **Planning for child's return to school**

- Identify children who may be 'high risk' or vulnerable to school attendance difficulties – this can be based on a combination of data such as:
  - Children who have experienced known trauma during COVID-19 – this may include loss or bereavement or heightened mental health difficulties
  - Children at key transition points as noted elsewhere in this document
  - Children who may be considered 'vulnerable' for example due to special educational needs and disabilities, peer difficulties, bullying or known difficulties in the family
  - Children who were experiencing absences prior to COVID-19 – where possible categorise absence data e.g. demographically (by gender, age, ethnicity, year group), by degree of absenteeism (chronic, emerging etc) and by high risk or vulnerable groups (students with social, emotional or learning difficulties). An understanding of which groups at school are most at risk for absenteeism helps to identify where to assign preventative resources.
- It is likely that staff have been in regular contact with vulnerable children and families and will have up to date information regarding their well-being and feelings about returning to school. In planning for the child's return to school it will be important to gather the child and parent's views directly and as far as practically possible involve them in designing what their return to school may look like. Plans for vulnerable children may need to be individual and where possible linked to their views. The process of children and families feeling listened to will support partnership working and contribute to their return to school. Questions could include:
  - What would make school a perfect place to come in the morning?
  - If we could change one thing about school, what would it be?
  - What's the worst thing about not being at school?
  - Who are you most looking forward to seeing when you return to school?
- Establish short term and long-term goals with the child and their family so that everybody is clear on the plan moving forward, with the recognition that these are fluid and possible to change if required. Some families may want to map this out on their calendar or a visual timetable – but this shouldn't be mandatory as some families may find this stress inducing.
- Discuss and agree what the plan might be for days and times where school might feel overwhelming for the child and family.
- Other preparations for the young person's return to school may include briefing peers (where appropriate and agreed with the child and parent), selecting suitable buddies and arranging a time and place for the young person to be met by welcoming staff

### **Starting and maintaining children's return to school**

- Key staff to meet and greet the young person to check in with them and discuss the day ahead.



- Ensure that the young person has access to supportive staff or mentors
- Maintain close communication with parents regarding progress and successive steps in the plan for increasing attendance. Agree ways to celebrate successes and problem solve how to overcome obstacles with the parent and child.
- Regularly review procedures with key staff in school as a standing item on staff briefing/inclusion meetings.
- Recognise that initial progress could be slow and that attendance may improve and dip again over time – this will be particularly important as the child but also their family and the wider school system learn to adjust and process the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prepare all key people (including child and parents) for ‘bumps in the road’ so that people do not lose hope in the young person’s ability to eventually return to school full-time.
- If attendance difficulties do persist over time or worsen, despite appropriate interventions, then consider accessing appropriate services if the child and parent consent to this (e.g. early help, Educational Psychology, Communication and Autism team etc).

**All staff** to be alert and responsive to early warning signs of school attendance problems which may include:

- Difficulties attending certain classes (e.g. P.E) or other times (e.g. lunchtime)
- Difficulties eating lunch or attending the dinner hall
- Difficulties entering the school building upon entry to school
- Difficulties transitioning from class to class
- Frequent visits to student support or the main office
- Increased requests to leave the classroom to attend the toilet
- Persistent distress in the classroom (crying or withdrawal)
- Persistent distress upon separation from family members (e.g. crying or clinging)
- Persistent requests during the school day to contact parents or frequent daily contact with parents or others outside of school
- Sudden declines in attainments or completed work

## Supporting children at different transition points

Please see below for further suggestions related to age groups:

### Pre-school to Reception class

- Assuming visits aren’t possible, class teachers could have a telephone conversation with each family of their new cohort. There will need to be an even stronger emphasis on consulting with parents/carers to help reduce stress which can otherwise transmit to their child.
- Gather information about children including information about family, friends, sleep, what comforts them, how they show distress etc.
- Parents could read books to their children about starting primary school. The teacher could also record themselves reading a book.
- Suggesting that parents could engage children in trying on their school uniform.
- Using role play to try and introduce some scenarios that might occur in reception e.g. making friends “hi, my name is...”. Play is an important part of children learning and being able to process information.

- Suggesting to parents that their child could bring a transitional object – something from home that reminds them of their parents during the day.

**Leaving primary school to go to secondary school**

- Try to continue some of the school 'traditions' e.g. leavers hoody, a yearbook, social activity and leavers assembly.
- Getting children involved in making a memories book from their time in school. Each child could contribute a memory, and these could be collated into a book.
- A list of new clubs that the children could join may be offered. This could help them find something they enjoy doing and think about making friendships.
- Children to write down their favourite/most enjoyable memory/ aspect of primary school which could be given to the younger children moving into their class.
- Let the children know where the pastoral care is and how it can be accessed in their new school.
- Where possible children from the secondary school could be allocated as a buddy to those transitioning from the primary school.

**Leaving secondary school to go onto Further Education**

- Try to find a way to continue some of the school 'traditions' e.g. leavers hoody, a yearbook, school prom, shirt signing.
- Leavers assembly.
- Further Education sites could provide testimonials of other students' experiences to give an example of what they can expect.

**Useful Websites**

<http://www.birminghameducationsupportservices.co.uk/Page/16955>

<https://www.seainclusion.co.uk/post/the-many-problems-of-returning-to-school>

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With credit to SEA Inclusion and the Microsoft Teams national working party of Educational Psychologists/Education Professionals.

**Further EPS Support.** Supervision for school staff can be sought through your allocated EP. If parents of the children you teach would also like any further support or guidance, your school should have received an advert with details on about how parents can access the Birmingham EPS parent telephone consultation service, where parents can have a 30-minute consultation with an Educational Psychologist.